

**Welfare to Work Commission  
Of the Suffolk County Legislature**

**Minutes of the August 27, 2008 Meeting**

**Present:** Richard Koubek, Chair; Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair; Legislator Kate Browning; Bridget DePasquale; Jack Caffey; Linda O'Donohoe; Peggy Boyd; Judy Cahn; Nina Leonhardt; Rob Greenberger; Don Friedman; Michael Stoltz; Kathy Malloy; Gwen Branch; Eric Lopez; Peter Barnett; Ken Zone

**Excused:** Sondra Bachety; Ellen Krakow; Pam Killoran

**Absent:** Idania Aponte; Joan Grant

**Guest:** Gail Vizzini, Director of the Suffolk County Legislature's Budget Review office

1. **Minutes:** The minutes of the July 29<sup>th</sup> meeting were approved unanimously with minor corrections, on a motion by Jack Caffey, seconded by Peter Barnett.
2. **New Members:** Chair Richard Koubek welcomed two new Commission members: Bridget DePasquale who replaced him for Catholic Charities and Eric Lopez who replaced James Andrews for SCDOL.
3. **Presentation on Staffing:** Richard Koubek introduced Gail Vizzini, Director of the Legislature's Budget Review Office (BRO) for a presentation on staffing. He noted that the Commission has been frustrated with understaffing at SCDSS and SCDOL over the past several years in its attempts to introduce small policy changes such as an education/training mentoring program or evening hours. This frustration led to an examination of the SCAME report on staffing at the July Commission meeting. There has also been extensive Commission discussion of the Executive practice of not filling staff vacancies so as to accrue a "rollover savings" for the County. Some members of the Commission believe that there may have been a significant increase in rollover staff savings under the present Administration when compared with previous administrations. To clarify some of these issues, it was agreed that the Commission ask Ms. Vizzini to provide additional insights on County staffing policies. The Commission has been particularly concerned about the 10% staff vacancy rate at SCDSS and the existence of authorized and funded yet unfilled positions, "true vacancies," as well as the so-called "phantom" positions which are not authorized, funded or filled. Among important points on staffing made by Ms. Vizzini in her presentation to the Commission were:
  - a. The BRO is charged to provide the Legislature with on-going analyses of the County budget. The County Executive has its own budget office.
  - b. It is understood at the time that the County budget is adopted in November, that there is not enough money in that budget to fill every staff position authorized by the Legislature's adoption of the budget. This funding gap between authorized and filled positions can be made up by such factors as staff who retire or who take extended, unpaid leaves and are replaced by less costly hires or substitutes. For example, County retirement incentive staff

replacements were capped at 20% of the cost of the retiring staff on the assumption that new hires would receive much less in salaries and benefits than the retired employees they replaced. There is a belief among some that this 20% replacement cap is too low to cover the County's staffing needs.

- c. When the budget is adopted, it is assumed that every existing job will be filled but that a portion of the authorized/unfilled positions will be filled based on staffing priorities set by the County Executive. The Legislature's BRO assesses at given points in time the ratio of filled jobs to vacancies and whether there are sufficient funds to fill the vacancies. However, the decision to fill vacancies rests with the County Executive.
  - d. Requests to fill vacant positions are made by departments when they submit SCIN forms to the County Executive. The SCINs are authorized based on the Executive's staffing priorities and the availability of funds. The Legislature is not involved in the SCIN-approval process nor is there BRO understanding as to why the County Executive's SCIN process can take two months or more to complete.
  - e. The current anticipated County revenue shortfall of \$35 million in the general fund (after all budget adjustments such as the sale of tobacco rights or increases in County fees are made,) as well as the general wish of County Executives to create a surplus that alleviates the need to raise taxes, influences the staffing priorities and the SCIN approval process. Decisions to delay or not fill "true vacancies" in the past have saved the County \$20 million a year in "rollover savings."
  - f. There are certain staff positions that receive mandated replacement priority such as Child Protective Services (CPS) and Medicaid. The CPS unit at SCDSS has piloted an automatic-fill policy that seems to be expediting the ability of the Department to quickly backfill vacant staff positions.
  - g. Some staff cost savings have historically been made by contracting out County services to not-for-profit or other private agencies that usually have lower staffing costs.
  - h. Regarding State and federal reimbursements of staff positions, which range at SCDSS from 40% to 100% of the staffing costs, some of these revenues are lost due to staff vacancies. There is a lack of clarity as to how much reimbursement revenues are lost and why these losses are accepted by the County Executive, particularly in staff positions such as Food Stamps that are 100% reimbursed.
  - i. The County Executive holds two public hearings in August at which the public can comment on budget issues prior to the release of the Executive's budget in mid-September. These hearings are very poorly attended.
4. **Discussion of Staffing:** An extensive discussion of County staffing took place, with many members of the Commission expressing concern that staff vacancies are reducing the quality of services, causing a loss in federal and State reimbursement funds, causing serious morale problems among the staff as well as high staff turnover rates. The following Commission actions were considered:

- a. Kathy Malloy of SCAME has asked the union's accounting firm to identify the actual number of "true vacancies" and "phantom" vacancies that comprise the 10% staff vacancies at SCDSS.
  - b. Legislator Kate Browning will attempt to get case worker/client ratios from the past several years to determine if there has been an increase in the ratios due to staff vacancies.
  - c. Several Commission members noted that umbrella organizations such as the Suffolk Community Council, the Peconic Community Council and the Health and Welfare Council of LI, should alert the public and especially contract-agency representatives to attend the County Executive's August public hearings on the budget to express their concerns about staffing, contracts and other issues.
  - d. Don Friedman reported that the Empire Justice Center recently filed a class action suit against SCDSS because of delays in Medicaid application approvals and that these delays may be caused by understaffing.
  - e. An Ad-Hoc Staffing Committee was formed to determine if the Commission should take a position on staffing during the 2009 County budget hearings. The Committee consists of: Richard Koubek; Kathy Liguori; Jack Caffey; Kathy Malloy; Don Friedman; Peter Barnett; Michael Stoltz.
5. **Evening Hours at SCDSS:** Richard Koubek asked Vice Chair Kathy Liguori to chair this portion of the meeting. Mr. Koubek again noted that he is on the Steering Committee of MICAH (Mobilized Interfaith Coalition Against Hunger) a Long Island interfaith, anti-poverty campaign, some of whose members brought the issue of evening hours before the Commission in 2007. He reported that representatives of MICAH have been meeting with their County legislators who serve on the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee to determine if they will support a resolution to create a pilot test of SCDSS Commissioner Janet DeMarzo's "working families emergency call-in center" to be open one evening a week. Legislator John Kennedy has agreed to introduce a resolution to this effect, which would call for staffing by flex time rather than voluntary overtime to staff the pilot. Legislator Duwayne Gregory agreed on August 26<sup>th</sup> to co-sponsor the resolution. Mr. Koubek and Kathy Malloy confirmed that MICAH and the SCAME union have been in discussion regarding the union's concerns about introducing a new SCDSS pilot when they are so understaffed. The union may be interested in the flex time component of the pilot but would make no comment until they see Legislator Kennedy's resolution. Since the Commission has voted to support the concept of evening hours, it was agreed that a determination on future action will be made after the Commission examines a resolution to create the pilot.
6. **Education Pilot:** Richard Koubek resumed chairing the meeting. He reported and Gail Vizzini confirmed that the Legislature placed the \$29,000 for the Case Management/Mentoring project in the 2009 budget for Suffolk County Community College which was adopted in July, 2008. Nina Leonhardt and Judy Cahn reported that enrollments in this year's pilot are lower than last year and that the Commission will not see the full number of participants, due to the Continuing Enrollment policy adopted by SCDOL this year, until the pilot is concluded in the early fall.
7. **Child Care Committee:**

- a. Kathy Liguori reported that a coalition of child-care providers has been formed to advocate for a restoration of the \$2.2 million in the Child Care Block Grant the State reduced for Suffolk County. This group has created advocacy letters and petitions to be sent to State legislators and Governor David Patterson. A national “Step Up for Kids” Day will be held on September 16<sup>th</sup>, with some Suffolk providers holding center Back to School meetings that will focus on the child care cuts.
  - b. A copy of SCDSS Commissioner DeMarzo’s analysis of the \$2.2 million State child care cuts was distributed. Ms. Liguori noted that Suffolk’s funds were reduced because Commissioner DeMarzo anticipated increases in demand for services and child care costs and ran a \$6 million surplus to meet these future costs. This surplus was used by the State to justify the \$2.2 million cuts which, over the long run, could reach \$10 million in lost child-care funds for Suffolk County according to Commissioner DeMarzo. She noted that all enrollments in Title XX child care slots for working poor families have been halted by SCDSS due to the cuts, and that the cuts will have an especially harsh impact on Suffolk which has higher demand for services than other counties. She also pointed out that the State and County may not be in compliance with federal child care regulations. It was agreed that the Child Care Committee would convene soon to examine these issues.
8. **Employment Assessment Committee:** Chair Rob Greenberger reported that he is awaiting written responses from Kim Staab at SCDSS to questions posed about introducing holistic assessments of clients so as to avoid unnecessary sanctions of clients who are generally in compliance with SCDSS and SCDOL requirements.
  9. **Next Meeting:** The next meeting of the Commission will be **Wednesday, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 9:30 AM at the One Stop Center of SCDOL.**